

# Community organisations for food systems change: reflecting on food movement dynamics in Manitoba.

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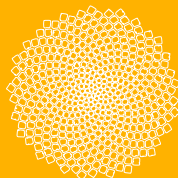
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# Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

The People's Knowledge Editorial Collective



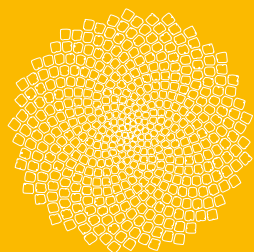
Reclaiming  
**Diversity &  
Citizenship**

*Everyday Experts* explains how knowledge built up through first-hand experience can help solve the crisis in the food system. It brings together fifty-seven activists, farmers, practitioners, researchers and community organisers from around the world to take a critical look at attempts to improve the dialogue between people whose knowledge has been marginalised in the past and others who are recognised as professional experts.

Using a combination of stories, poems, photos and videos, the contributors demonstrate how people's knowledge can transform the food system towards greater social and environmental justice. Many of the chapters also explore the challenges of using action and participatory approaches to research.

The chapters share new insights, analysis and stories that can expand our imagination of a future that encompasses:

- making dialogue among people with different ways of understanding the world central to all decision-making
- the re-affirmation of Indigenous, local, traditional and other knowledge systems
- a blurring of the divide between professional expertise and expertise that is derived from experience
- transformed relationships amongst ourselves and with the Earth to confront inequality and the environmental crisis



The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

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Cover photos:

(left): Field teaching by Farmer Research Team members about planting methods, Lobi area. Photo taken by C. Hickey, December 2014. Used with the permission of project participants.

(right): The Coventry Men's Shed participatory video project exploring "What's Eating Coventry" and unpacks social justice issues related to food in the city of Coventry. More information at [www.peoplesknowledge.org](http://www.peoplesknowledge.org)

# Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

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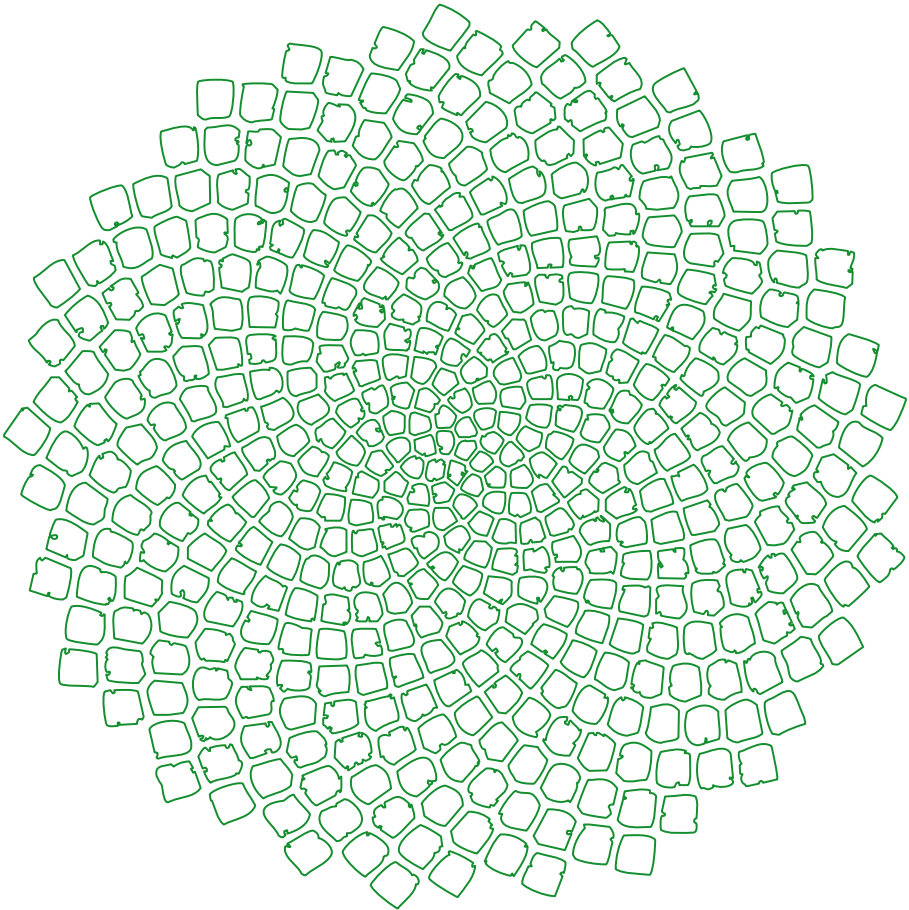
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Professor Michel Pimbert is the coordinator and editor in chief of the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series*.

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# 11





# Community organisations for food systems change: reflecting on food movement dynamics in Manitoba

Colin Anderson, Jeanette Sivilay and Kenton Lobe

**Geographical location:** Manitoba, Canada

**Chapter highlights:** This chapter presents a case study illustrating farmers and engaged citizens working collectively to better their communities, challenge government policy and fight for a more just and sustainable food system.

The case chronicles and analyses the creation of different organisations or 'mobilising structures' in the Canadian Province of Manitoba. These emerged in response to a controversial food safety raid on a local farm.

Through critical self-analysis, participatory action research can open opportunities for protagonists in social movement organisations to critically examine their own practice in order to strategically resist being co-opted and to move towards more transformative change.

**Keywords:** food sovereignty, compartmentalisation, legitimacy, local food, mobilising structures, participatory action research, non-governmental organisations.



*Farmers and allies share a meal at an urban farm in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Photo Credit: Colin Anderson*

## 11.1 Introduction

Discontent with the shortcomings of the global corporate food system is giving rise to a wide range of projects, organisations and groups working to develop alternatives and transform the food system (Holt-Giménez and Shuttuck 2011). In North America and Europe, there has been an upsurge in local food initiatives seeking to connect farmers and consumers as co-producers of localised food systems (Renting *et al.* 2012). These initiatives include direct farm marketing schemes, farmers' markets, food hubs, community-supported agriculture and local food cooperatives. They generally seek autonomy from the corporate food regime and aim to create more just and sustainable relations around food.

While sustainable local food systems may offer an alternative to the corporate food system, many challenges prevent these grassroots innovations from reaching their full potential. Some have argued that local food proponents are too focused on individualism and entrepreneurship (Guthman 2008), that local food activism caters mostly to the white middle class (Cadieux and Slocum 2015), and that a focus on local pragmatism can undermine the broader processes of transformation (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). Indeed, decades of neoliberalism have shaped the way people think about food activism and how to achieve food system change. Further,

government regulation and policy, food prices and consumer expectations have all been influenced by corporate industrial food in ways that undermine the development and scaling up and out of alternative food systems (Laforge *et al.* 2016). Thus, while local food systems are emerging from the bottom up, managed by individuals and groups developing pragmatic alternatives, it is essential to address strategically how food producers and citizens can enact a wider range of tactics, strategies and politics to take back control over food and agriculture policy and practice. In this context, any efforts to transform the food system must involve a conscious and strategic struggle to build food sovereignty at multiple scales.

Food sovereignty provides a framework that is uniting citizens around the world in a global struggle for a more just and sustainable food system (Desmarais and Wittman 2014, Wittman *et al.* 2010). It represents an alternative, politicised and radical approach to food system transformation, emphasising the need to put control over food systems and food policy in the hands of farmers and consumers rather than with elite institutions and corporations (Nyéléni Declaration 2007). For those involved in the pragmatic work of developing local food systems in the Global North, food sovereignty implies a reorientation towards working collectively to challenge the politics, institutions and structures of the dominant food system, to focus on power relations in the food system and to work across scales of organisation (Iles and Montenegro de Witt 2015). Fundamental to this process is the development of collective mobilising structures (Tarrow 1998), such as networks and organisations that provide mechanisms to develop collective identity, critical analysis and platforms for sustained collective action.

Tarrow (1998) suggests that there is no single model of social movement organisation, but the type of mobilising structure chosen by any social movement has an impact on their agency and success. More formalised and hierarchical non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are often well resourced and may be more conducive to sustained activities. They are also better suited to interfacing with authorities and mainstream allies (Levkoe 2015). However, formal NGOs have also been criticised for losing much of their capacity for disruption and for their propensity to become co-opted into the agenda of mainstream or reformist projects (Choudry and Kapoor 2013). In this regard, more autonomous, horizontally organised groups and networks are better suited as mobilising structures for politicised and contentious activity. Yet, decentralised and autonomous groups can lack coordination and connectivity. Thus, Tarrow (1998, p.137) proposes: “a delicate balance between formal organisation and autonomy – one that can only be bridged by strong, informal, nonhierarchical connective structures”.

In this chapter, we focus on the importance of understanding the politics, strategies, collective structures and organisational governance that arise as farmers and allies come together to organise for food system change. We present a participatory action research (PAR) project from the Canadian prairies, in which citizens are self-organising to challenge the policies and regulations that limit the development of sustainable

local food systems. Our narrative begins with a controversial raid by government food safety inspectors on a local farm, and we track the various grassroots responses and organisational forms that emerged in the wake of this catalysing event. We critically examine how established norms, practices and pressures towards mainstream forms of NGOs have the potential to depoliticise, channel dissent and undermine more confrontational approaches. We chronicle our struggle to cope with the difficult tension between addressing the immediate need for pragmatic reform and the longer-term aspirations towards transformative change. Our participatory action research (PAR) approach has provided an important opportunity to engage in reflective self-critical dialogue to contend with these dilemmas in collective processes of learning and action. Indeed, we discuss the potential of PAR as an approach that can help social movement actors contend collectively with the contradictions that arise when interacting with mainstream policies, institutions and cultures, while organising for social change. The remainder of this chapter provides an account of our PAR project, focusing first on describing the background of the case study, then on the different mobilising structures that have been pursued in our case, and finally by reflecting on some of the main debates and choices made by participants in these efforts.

#### Box 11.1. About the authors

Jeanette, Colin and Kenton have all been actively involved as participants and animators in the work described in this article and have written this account through their work as members of the action research committee of Sharing the Table Manitoba. Jeanette is a farmer and community organiser and has acted as the coordinator of Sharing the Table Manitoba. Colin is a participatory action researcher and participated as an organiser in the Real Manitoba Food Fight. He was involved in other related community food organisations in Manitoba over the previous eight years. Kenton is a food grower, a teacher at the Canadian Mennonite University and a member of the Sharing the Table Manitoba steering committee. He has been involved in a range of related community food initiatives in Manitoba over the past decade, including the Manitoba Community Supported Agriculture network and the Manitoba Food Charter. This narrative and analysis is based on a participatory action research project and draws on the experiences of the authors as well as dialogue with the wider group of participants involved in Sharing the Table Manitoba.

### 11.2 The participatory action research case study

This chapter is based on a PAR process carried out by participants in a network called Sharing the Table Manitoba. PAR is a collaborative process that combines critical analysis and action towards addressing practical and political challenges (Reason and Bradbury 2008). For us, this has comprised iterative cycles of observation, reflection, planning and action, with each cycle leading to increased capacity for action, learning

and change (Anderson and McLachlan 2015, Kemmis *et al.* 2014). Our goal throughout this process was to apply our collective analysis to better understand how we could most effectively organise our efforts to gain political agency and to adapt our strategies based on this analysis. In this way, we wanted to learn more about the world by working together to try to change it. The PAR team has been facilitated by Sivilay and Anderson, but has involved a wider evolving collective of farmers, researchers and consumers involved in Sharing the Table who committed to adopting a PAR approach to develop and document our work and whose voices are represented in the case study below. We facilitated the PAR process as part of a commitment to collectively observing and analysing the evolving political situation in the province, carrying out actions both as individuals and a group, and reflecting on these actions to inform further planning and action. We documented this process through note-taking, recordings of our group debates and from qualitative interviews, which form the basis of the narrative presented as a case study.

In August 2013, the Manitoba provincial government raided and confiscated cured meats produced by the local, mixed farm of Clint and Pam Cavers. Ironically, just months earlier, the same provincial government had awarded a prize to the Cavers for the same cured meats in recognition of them being the most exciting new farm product in Manitoba (Anderson 2013). The raid resulted in the destruction of their products, a \$1600 fine, damage to their reputation and loss of years of testing and product development. While the province claimed to have 'non-physical evidence' that the Cavers sold their meat products illegally, these allegations were denied by the Cavers and the government eventually dropped the charges without producing any evidence (Laforge *et al.* 2016).

The raid was widely considered to be unwarranted and unfair, but also to reflect more pervasive problems with a provincial regulatory and policy framework and culture that favoured large scale food systems and that undermines the autonomy of food producers and inhibits the development of localised food systems (Laforge *et al.* 2016). The event sparked a surge of political organising amongst farmers, citizens and other allies in Manitoba to advocate for changes to these policies and institutions and to ensure that small farmers have more control over policy and practice related to local food systems.

While there are many food activists in Manitoba who embrace a critical stance and push for a radical agenda in their work, there has generally been an absence of an organisation to amplify their voices in debates around local food. The most prominent province-wide NGO working to promote local food systems is Food Matters Manitoba, which emerged out of the process of creating the Manitoba Food Charter. In 2005, an ad hoc volunteer group made up of individuals and representatives from grassroots groups led an extensive process of community deliberation through 70 public meetings convening people from across Manitoba to write the Manitoba Food Charter (Manitoba Food Charter 2005). The Food Charter represented a broad call for

citizens and government to work towards community food security and food justice, and for greater involvement of the public in policymaking (Lobe 2005).

The participatory process that led to the Food Charter was an important phase in grassroots organising, building solidarity and articulating a holistic vision of food systems change for Manitoba. It also led to the formation of Food Matters Manitoba as an NGO that would carry forward the vision and momentum of the Food Charter. Over the past decade, close ties with the public health department of the provincial government and a strong track record in securing funding from multiple levels of government have allowed Food Matters Manitoba to bring a diverse range of actors from civil society together with the private and public sector to work towards community food security and to deliver a variety of community food programmes.



*Video about the Real Manitoba Food fight, a campaign to contest the industrial orientation of food safety regulations in Manitoba and the lack of support for community food systems.*

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1F6sCPMlm8>

However, Food Matters Manitoba has also avoided advancing a more critical perspective that directly confronts government; for example, they intentionally avoid using the explicitly radical food sovereignty discourse to frame their work. Further, while Food Matters has had a strong presence in northern and urban areas of the province, they have had less success in connecting with small farmers and rural areas. In this context, when the Cavers farm raid occurred, many felt that there was no organisational body to represent the needs of small farmers engaged in local food networks and there was a need to develop collective capacity to engage in political strategies to affect change.

### 11.3 Three mobilising structures developed in the wake of the Cavers farm raid

The incident on the Cavers farm led to the emergence of three interrelated mobilising structures that developed chronologically and were advanced as vehicles through which farmers, consumers and allies could work politically to develop local food systems in Manitoba.



*The Real Manitoba Food Fight logo.*

#### **The Real Manitoba Food Fight (established in August 2013)**

The raid on the Cavers farm occurred coincidentally at the same time as a class from the University of Manitoba was scheduled to visit. Members of the class recorded the confrontation and used the footage as the basis of a short video aiming to raise awareness, beginning the first of the collective structures: a campaign called The Real Manitoba Food Fight (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1F6sCPMIm8>). Originally coordinated by a student group, the campaign was augmented by an ad hoc collective of farmers, chefs, students and researchers through a series of meetings, op-eds published in local papers and social media communications. The campaign aimed to develop a critical and politicised voice around local food systems in Manitoba, focusing on discussing the raid, raising awareness of the unclear and inconsistent regulatory environment to which small farmers and processors are subjected, and establishing a place where citizens could participate in dialogue around these issues. While the website and social media platforms for the Real Manitoba Food Fight remain online, the campaign has been largely inactive. The campaign was effective as a single-issue mobilising structure in a particular political moment; however, it was not viewed as a suitable structure for long-term mobilisation. As the initial enthusiasm and political tensions that arose in response to the Cavers incident subsided, participants in these efforts grappled with the challenge of how to extend their energies to enable more proactive and sustained political lobbying.

### **Sharing the Table Manitoba (established in September 2013)**

The Real Manitoba Food Fight thus led to the formation of a network called Sharing the Table Manitoba, which involved a similar contingent of people, but was intended to be a more durable entity that could bring different actors together. The network was originally named Farmers and Eaters Sharing the Table or FEAST, but the name was changed to be more inclusive of a wider diversity of actors, including hunters, fisherfolk, chefs, retailers and other allies in the grassroots struggle to build local food systems.

Sharing the Table Manitoba was developed as an informal network rather than as a formally constituted NGO, and was driven forward initially by a transitional steering group. Its original participants are mainly individuals from long-established organisations working on food issues in the province include members of the National Farmers Union, the Farmers Market Association of Manitoba, Food Matters Manitoba, Small Farms Manitoba, Manitoba Alternative Food Research Alliance, the University of Manitoba, the University of Winnipeg, Canadian Mennonite University, various chefs, small farmers and their consumer allies. The breadth of these perspectives allowed the network to discuss the issues strategically and form multiple perspectives in ways that enable the individuals and groups to pursue joint strategies and support the decentralised work represented by each participant.

Sharing the Table Manitoba has thus operated as a horizontally structured meeting place, modelled after the metaphor of a community meal, where people can come together regularly and convivially to share ideas, strengthen relationships and contribute to a grassroots food movement in the province. The name also implies a certain level of informality, which has been a defining feature of the movement, where the intent has been to remain as a coordinated yet decentralised network rather than a structured organisation. The effectiveness of this informal format and mode of organising was debated by the council of Sharing the Table Manitoba, especially in light of calls for a formal NGO to represent the interests of small farmers in dealings with government.

### **Direct Farm Manitoba (established in March 2016)**

In January 2015, partly in response to the pressure exerted through the Real Manitoba Food Fight, the provincial government mandated the Small Scale Food Manitoba Working Group to address the concerns of small-scale farmers and direct farm marketing in Manitoba. This group coordinated a process of consultation to generate a report of more than 20 recommendations to government on how to increase support for small farms in Manitoba (Small Scale Food Manitoba Working Group 2015). Several members of this working group were also participants in Sharing the Table Manitoba, engaging the wider network in conversations on relevant issues, sharing information and gathering feedback. The report was considered by many to include a range of promising recommendations. Some of these have been acted upon, including adding new extension staff focusing on supporting local food systems, examining methods through which small farms can operate better within the



supply management system and, most directly relevant to this chapter, stating that government should, “facilitate a process to allow small scale producers to organise themselves” (Small Scale Food Manitoba Working Group 2015, p.48).

Following this recommendation to government, the provincial authorities – along with farmers who participated in the production of the report – hosted a meeting in November 2015 to develop interest in starting such an organisation. The meeting included more than 50 farmers and resulted in the formation of a volunteer steering committee who agreed to move forward with the creation of a formal, sector-based organisation. The group decided to approach an already existing but largely inactive organisation (the Farmers Market Association of Manitoba) as a potential home for a new sector-based organisation. In March 2015, this was constituted as the Direct Farm Manitoba. Some of the key individuals at the helm of this new working group are also participants in Sharing the Table Manitoba. Indeed, individuals have moved fluidly between these different mobilising structures, reflecting shifting priorities and opportunities over time.

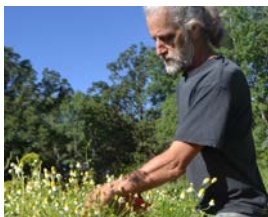
## 11.4 Unpacking the politics of organising

### Seeking legitimacy

If mobilising structures are to be effective as vehicles of social change, they must gain legitimacy and recognition in order to encourage participation. Thus, participants in Sharing the Table Manitoba frequently discussed how and with whom to gain legitimacy as an important element of engaging effectively with farmers, policymakers, the public and other actors implicated in efforts to create change in practice and policy. Legitimacy can be seen as a form of social capital; a mobilising structure obtains legitimacy if considered an appropriate body, network or space in which to pursue collective goals. Where legitimacy is lacking in mobilising structures, initiatives and efforts can be hampered and participants demoralised over time if it becomes apparent they are not being taken seriously (Iles and Montenegro de Witt 2015).

It was clear however that the question of with whom to gain legitimacy was important in terms of choosing how the group presented itself externally, what kinds of actions were taken and what organisational form was developed. Some felt strongly that the network should focus on working closely with, and gaining legitimacy from, government, which aligned well with the recommendations of the government-commissioned Small Scale Food Manitoba Working Group report. Others felt legitimacy should be sought among grassroots actors involved in local food systems to create an organisational space and structure that was more independent from government. The latter were more interested in a critical and possibly confrontational approach to bring citizens together to debate key issues, raise public consciousness about food sovereignty and challenge the dominance of

large-scale industrial food systems. The hope was to provide an otherwise absent critical and politicised voice that would hold government to account and push for the inclusion of grassroots actors in policymaking.



*It's essential not only to form a lobby group to government, to [also] be reactionary. I mean, we have to if government is going to... maintain an attitude of control, then there is going to be constant need for that kind of public reaction. (David Neufeld)*

These debates played out in the discussions around organisational governance. Some felt that a formal member-based organisation was the best and only path to being recognised by institutional actors and to gaining access to the decision-making spaces of the provincial government.



*... You have to have had your validity step. The step where you show who your members are. (Kate Storey)*

For participants accustomed to working on advocacy with government, a member-based organisation was the most obvious route to having influence over policy. However, others sought to pursue a more open-ended, flexible, network-based approach not driven by the desire for legitimacy from government and one that would avoid cordoning off participation to members only.



*...There are more ways to create legitimacy than being recognised by the government. We speak up and make our voice louder we create that kind of legitimacy as well. (Terry Mireau)*



*...Legitimacy comes from the people involved. There is a lot of power in us meeting and having on-going meetings and inviting other people to meet because these discussions are always important. Even to support each other – people who are eating the food, growing the food, people who are interested in food sovereignty issues – it is valuable for us to get together. (Lydia Carpenter)*

Thus, participants felt that the wider networking, public awareness and discussion that were facilitated by Sharing the Table Manitoba and the Real Manitoba Food Fight could be the basis of a social form of legitimacy that may be considered more relevant to many than formal recognition by government.



*I agree that we probably do need a valid structure for some activities, as Kate has said. But then to agree with Lydia that that structure, the official structure, does not really confirm our legitimacy or validity in terms of popular opinion or appearing as though we represent the groups that we do or getting our side of the story known in the media. The PR does not really require a valid structure at this point. We probably need both, but in the meantime, before we have a valid structure, we should still be pushing forward on putting out press releases and meeting and talking to other groups and things like that. (Curtis Brown)*

### Compartmentalisation

In response to the government-mandated Small Scale Food Working Group report, both government and farmers called for the creation of a new industry or sector group for small-scale farmers. However, participants in Sharing the Table Manitoba were concerned that the sector group model conflicted with the more holistic and alternative aims and values of their movement based on collaboration amongst a wider set of actors in the food system.

*[There is a recommendation that puts] small-scale food marketing people into one of the boxes that the government has already created for everybody else. They put pigs in a box, beef in a box, eggs in a box, they create a commodity organisation and they like to look at everything in isolation. (Kate Storey)*

The exclusion of consumers was also considered to be problematic by some. Indeed, many in Sharing the Table Manitoba took the position that local food system development should be farmer-led, but inclusive of the participation of consumer citizens and other allies. Thus, the reductive sector-based approach risked undermining the strength of a method that would include the active participation of urban people who co-produce local food systems.

*But with direct farm marketers we all know our customers, and we know all our processors, we know all the people who handle our food and so it's natural and right that it be a more diverse group. (David Neufeld)*

The sector approach is based on an implicit framing of farmers as removed from consumers, and these groups as having competing interests despite the intention of

direct connections and solidarity that is promoted as a basis of local food systems. A compartmentalised approach also hijacks the intention to pursue joint interests between farmers and consumers, and opportunities to form cooperative and mutually beneficial modes of exchange and social relationships. These concerns were aired in one of the Sharing the Table Manitoba meetings.



*[We need to hold on to] that piece that invites a broader understanding of the food system that includes eaters [consumers] and does not segment... Yes, there are difficult policy conversations, but part of our argument, I think – part of the food sovereignty argument, anyway – is that eaters and growers are inherently connected. Growers are eaters. We do not want to participate in that segmenting out. (Kenton Lobe)*

Excluding consumers means that their input and participation in matters of agriculture, processing and food distribution are considered to be irrelevant and it effectively leaves them with no voice in these debates.

It is also clear that the dominant emphasis of this work has been on western white settler food systems, which has inadvertently excluded indigenous food producers. None of the three mobilising structures – the Real Manitoba Food Fight, Sharing the Table Manitoba and Direct Farm Manitoba – made efforts to widen their network to include aboriginal groups, who clearly have common issues, although come from a different historical, cultural and political position. There is a strong network of Indigenous organisations working on food issues in the province and, indeed, just as much need to build solidarity and mutual support between indigenous and settler communities as between rural and urban people. David Neufeld pointed this out and, although addressing this gap has been a recurring conversation in Sharing the Table Manitoba, it has yet to be acted on in any meaningful way.

*I hear Aboriginal providers and eaters are as keen to be part of a radically diverse organisation as most smaller scale farmers are. (David Neufeld)*

The compartmentalisation between constituents in grassroots food movements fragments an already small base of active citizens advocating for change, hollowing out the capacity and potential of more diverse and broadly constituted grassroots coordination. During the Real Manitoba Food Fight, collaboration between farmers and urban consumer allies was fundamental to holding the government to account. The contributions of urban allies in the campaign pressured the government to drop the charges against the Cavers family and raised public awareness about the wider issues. The widespread public discontent expressed through letters, a petition and

writing in the popular media pressured the government to commission the Small Scale Food Working Group and examine support for small-scale farmers and local food in the province. Many in the group recognised the importance of working with supportive urban allies who were better positioned to criticise the government publicly, whereas many farmers expressed fears of being targeted by inspectors if they 'stuck their heads up'.

*...A good portion of the folks who ought to be at the table simply will not stick their heads up because their livelihoods are at risk. Those that eat their food are the ones who are able to advocate. (David Neufeld)*

Sharing the Table Manitoba participants expressed concerns about the prescription to form an industry group by the provincial government. This focus on 'industry' frames local food in narrow economic terms and was viewed as a reductionist and depoliticising channelling of an otherwise highly social, cultural and political movement. To focus on developing the industry without attending to the wider set of relations within which local food is embedded was seen to erode the scope of possible change that any local food industry group could achieve. Drawing from his experience with the organic movement, Terry discussed parallels with the development of the organic industry.

*I saw what was happening... when [Canada Organic Regime] was coming in, when the Canadian government was basically saying 'we want to legitimate the organic industry', which we fought hard against, the word 'industry' and, in my opinion, gave in to the word 'sector'... but what I saw from that moment on, was that the organic movement in the country has been dead. As a movement it is dead, as an industry it has taken off... I am saying this as a precautionary tale to seeking legitimacy, or seeking recognition for who you are as a group or organisation... I really feel strongly about the language of movement and about the idea of becoming legitimised. Legitimacy comes with people. (Terry Mierau)*

The emphasis on the economic development of organic food by the Canadian government served to support the organic farming industry which was based on more modest reforms to the existing corporate controlled industrial system. This separated it from the organic farming movement, which was based on shifting control of food systems away from corporations and decommodifying food, amongst other transformative aims. Indeed, organic food is now considered to have gone down the road of 'conventionalisation', resembling a light version of industrialised agriculture with large-scale monoculture controlled by powerful multinational food corporations (Guthman 2004). Thus, seeking legitimacy in the eyes of dominant actors (government in this case) and within a sectoral, compartmentalised and economic framework was viewed as a way that NGOs often become co-opted when they attempt to align with government expectations.

## 11.5 Conclusion

The urgency and clarity of the problems that emerged in the wake of the raid on the Cavers farm prompted farmers and allies to recognise and discuss common experiences and concerns about food safety regulations and other barriers to building sustainable local food systems. This was thus an important political moment that crystallised a sense of a collective political identity, prompting critical questions and strategic thinking about how to create a more enabling environment for local food systems. It inspired thinking about the need for transformative change and for greater citizen control of food systems through longer-term processes of political mobilisation.

Over the past three years, members of our research group have been embedded in a wider collective of farmers and citizens working through three interrelated mobilising structures that emerged chronologically: a) The Real Manitoba Food Fight; b) Sharing the Table Manitoba; and c) Direct Farm Manitoba. It is clear that the more confrontational tactics carried out through the Real Manitoba Food Fight and Sharing the Table Manitoba were instrumental in forcing government to address the grievances of small-scale direct market farmers. These opportunities were considered by many to be under-realised, which largely reflected the absence of an organisation that government would consider as a legitimate voice for small-scale direct market farmers. Direct Farm Manitoba was established to fill this gap and was structured as a producer-only industry group designed specifically to work at the interface with government.

This progression from a confrontational campaign towards a sector-based formal NGO may reflect a relative depoliticisation of the grassroots response. Indeed, as grassroots movements gain legitimacy and resources, there is a risk that their efforts can become co-opted. By gaining minor concessions from governments and traction within an institutionalised arena, confrontational and broad-ranging politics can be transformed into more routine and conventional political strategies (Choudry and Shragge 2011). Further, leaders can become preoccupied with running organisations, pursuing isolated projects and single issues and competing to reform government policy. Indeed, NGOs similar to the Direct Farm Manitoba have been criticised for being a part of the mainstream institutional apparatus that is often used by governments to channel dissent into sanctioned, bureaucratic, legal and permissible forms of expression that may ultimately have little influence over policy (Choudry and Shragge 2011).

Participants in this project were aware of this dynamic and viewed the three organisational forms, not as mutually exclusive but as complementary tools that can be animated in response to the opportunities available in any given political moment. There are clearly limitations to each particular organisational approach and choosing one over another can limit the potential to create change. The approach has thus been to experiment with maintaining a diverse organisational ecosystem based on cooperation and overlap between the more conciliatory and

confrontational components. In this instance, key individuals participate in each component, cross-fertilising ideas and aligning strategies. An ongoing process of critical reflection and learning will be essential to adapt to changing circumstances and to ensure the balance and emphasis on the different approaches maximises the impact of this work.

While sustained overt political mobilisation may be desirable and necessary to advance food system change, there are many unanswered questions about how to realise these more radical aspirations in the absence of an urgent and catalytic need, such as the Cavers farm raid. Currently, Sharing the Table Manitoba is functioning as a space in which to facilitate virtual and in-person discussions around the politics of food in Manitoba and to bring together individuals and groups to discuss political opportunities and potential joint efforts. However, it has been relatively inactive in terms of overt political organising, where most of the energy has shifted towards the Direct Farm Manitoba. In this way, Sharing the Table Manitoba may at times act as a latent, yet reactive, resource that can be animated in response to specific grievances or political opportunities, rather than engaging in consistent and proactive political activity. Indeed, as we finish writing this chapter, another situation is developing in which a local farmer is being targeted by regulators, prompting new efforts within Sharing the Table Manitoba to organise support for this farmer and use the opportunity to further pressure government to make changes in policy. Interestingly, the Sharing the Table Manitoba steering group has discussed reanimating the Real Manitoba Food Fight (its name, logo, website and social media), indicating that its nature as an edgy campaign provides the best tool for this more confrontational work. Again, this demonstrates the value of having multiple organisational tools and the importance of remaining agile and flexible when re-orientating efforts in response to changing circumstances and opportunities.

Issues around who is included, who is excluded and who has power within these mobilising structures are looming and troubling questions in our work, and they require greater attention in food system activism (Slocum 2007). When we talk about and work towards food system change or transformation, it is too easy to gloss over the differences in the claims of a grassroots or general citizen who is said to be mobilised and empowered through activism and organising. It is vital that we begin to ask difficult questions about who is included and who is excluded, who benefits and who does not, who is invited to participate and for whom is the transformation and change directed. In Canada, there is no escaping the legacy and ongoing structures of colonialism (Kepkiewicz *et al.* 2017, Chapter 19), and it is vital to come to grips with the ways grassroots activism and participatory research can inadvertently reproduce colonial relationships. Indeed, this hard reflective work will require proponents of alternative food systems to incorporate de-colonial practices to challenge our own understanding, relations and practices of transformation.

There has always been an optimistic tone amongst our collective that we are engaging in imperfect but forward-looking strategies to advance a long-term project that builds capacity for food system change. But how do we know when our collective choices about self-organisation limit our potential and inadvertently lead us down a path that undermines our more radical demands and aspirations, such as those experienced in the organic movement? How do we see exclusion in our practices? How do we begin to engage with de-colonial thinking and practice? How do we balance the immediate concerns and concessions required to make incremental pragmatic changes with the desire for more radical systemic change? How do we deal with uncertainty regarding the choices about how to organise for transformation today, which have uncertain outcomes for the future? The collective of farmers, consumers, researchers and activists involved in Sharing the Table Manitoba have engaged in a process of self-analysis through cycles of PAR that have, through dialogue and reflection, allowed us to name the contradictions and form strategies about how to contend with them. It is vitally important to engage in collective critical reflection, not only on the ways that we are discussing the problems and solutions (e.g. food sovereignty versus food security), but also about how we choose to organise ourselves and why. The process of PAR and the cycles of action and reflection have provided us with an opportunity for what Holst (2002, p.87–88) calls “a pedagogy of mobilisation”, or the “learning inherent in the building and maintaining of a social movement and its organisations. Through participation in a social movement, people learn numerous skills and ways of thinking analytically and strategically as they struggle to understand their movement in motion.”

PAR opens space for reflection and dialogue amongst social movement participants and allows them to engage in a continuous deepening of what Paulo Freire (1970) calls conscientisation or developing critical consciousness. This process involves becoming aware of the inevitable objectivisation of social movements by powerful actors who attempt to enrol and re-shape dissent into mainstream development agendas. Through critical self-analysis, PAR can generate knowledge as a resource to support the continual battle for autonomy and the self-determination of subjects. In this way, the use of PAR can open up opportunities for protagonists in social movement organisations to critically examine their own practice and the mobilising structures they maintain in order to identify internal and external contradictions and to strategically resist being co-opted and to pursue transformative change.

The collective self-analysis discussed in this chapter is exploratory and provisional. We have been experimenting with alternatives, innovating and making mistakes, grappling with these questions and struggling to find the resources and time to pursue the organisation and activism that we believe is necessary to push for change. We have used this writing project as an opportunity to critically discuss the dilemmas that have arisen. We are working through the challenges, trade-offs and compromises made when pursuing legitimacy with government while also recognising the limitations of these institutionalised strategies. We are using and promoting self-critical reflection and dialogue as a means to contend with these issues, which have provided some



opportunity to strategically adapt our efforts. We feel that this process of reflection, however, should not be an inward one carried out amongst our collective alone. Wider dialogue and reflection amongst allies in similar struggles are essential to share with and learn from others, develop a critical analysis and build solidarity. It is in this spirit – a desire to both share and learn in a multi-voiced dialogue – that we wrote this chapter and participated in this work. To this end, we hope these ideas provoke your thinking and we welcome your feedback and engagement as critical friends seeking a more just and sustainable world.

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